

## **The Cross of Christ: God's Pain, Our Guilt**

This month of March ends with Easter Sunday, with the elation of victory, with the joy that transcends belief because our Savior rose from the grave. But all of that takes place at the end of the month, at the end of Jesus' journey through agonizing death. We celebrate on resurrection Sunday the triumph of our Savior over sin and over death, but if we pass too quickly along the road that leads to Resurrection, we will miss the significance of it all, we'll miss the depth of what our King accomplished through His sacrifice.

So, for the first four weeks of March, I would like to focus on the cross, on why it was necessary and on what Jesus accomplished on the cross. I want to use both Scriptures and the words of some of the songs we sing that help us to understand those Scriptures. And I want us to understand how we are to identify with Jesus' cross today, in our lives, in our world, right now. What does He want us to do in response to what He has done and what does Jesus mean when He tells us to take up our cross daily and follow Him? Okay? Let's get started.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And, after seeing billions of trillions of stars floating in the emptiness that had been there, and after speaking into existence giant cedars and tiny sponges, mountains and waterfalls, gazelles and sidewinder snakes, all the species of plants and animals and the beautiful natural environment in which they could thrive, God decided to make one further mammal, unlike the others in at least this one way -- this one would be made in His image, in some way "like" Him. And so a man was formed and a woman was taken out of the man and they were told to multiply and fill the earth, to have dominion, which meant to take responsibility, to care for, the rest of the created order, and to obey just one simple commandment -- don't eat the fruit of that one tree over there, because if you eat of that one tree, you will surely die.

God looked at everything He had made and saw that it was excellent in every way. He had made a beautiful world and had made it in wisdom and with all the balance and harmony that would allow it to be sustained over time.

But, even though the world was beautiful, there was, from the beginning, a poison within it, an enemy to the Creator, the deceiver, Lucifer. Lucifer came to the original couple with a different world view, a different analysis of their situation than what the Creator had given them. "You will not die!" the serpent said when the woman told him what God had said. "God knows that your eyes will be opened when you eat it. You will become just like God, knowing everything, both good and evil." What had they not known up until this point? Evil. All they had known was good. Everything in the garden was . . . good . . . very good. But they wanted to know more, more than what God had told them in wisdom was good for them. They wanted to know evil as well. And here the serpent did not lie -- they did come to know evil, too.

God found them hiding in the garden, ashamed because of their nakedness. A few

hours earlier they had been naked and not known shame . . . now they were stringing fig leaves together to cover themselves and were hiding from their Maker and daily companion. It was a tragedy of epic proportions, a situation in which obedience seemed so simple and profitable and disobedience so foolish, with so little to gain from it . . . “the knowledge of evil”. Oh, to know evil, so we can be wise -- who says such a thing?

People who are enticed by power, who want to have the edge over everyone else. The desire for power seduces people to sin, and here it grabbed the first two people and somehow made the knowledge of evil -- a knowledge that neither of them had had before -- somehow appealing, something that would make them wise.

So, what was the result of this first sin? The divine ideal for relationships was broken. We've seen already how the first couple hid from God and felt shame. We also know that they were quickly removed from the garden and from the presence of the tree of life lest they would eat of it and live forever. They were separated from God and, they took on a new kind of relationship with each other. Genesis 3:16:

*Then (God) said to the woman, 'You will bear children with intense pain and suffering. And though your desire will be for your husband, he will be your master.'*

God didn't pronounce that as a curse, as something He was about to make happen. He was merely stating this as a result of the sin of Adam and Eve: she would want him, but he would act towards her as a master more than as a true partner. This was part of the fall, a separation between God and humans and a separation between woman and man. This was part of the package that God had warned the two about, a part of knowing good and evil, and knowing meant more than knowing about - in the Hebrew world it always meant experiencing it.

The fall is described in Genesis 3, the next chapter describes the first murder and the next the genealogy of the first families of humans. And then comes chapter 6 in which the story of Noah begins and here we read this:

*Now Yahweh observed the extent of the people's wickedness, and He saw that all their thoughts were consistently and totally evil. So Yahweh was sorry He had ever made them; it broke His heart.*

God's heart was destined to be broken again and again, as the world He created in wisdom and beauty became the home for greed and violence, gross immorality, hatred and anger, pain and suffering. But before we move on from this earliest history of humans causing God pain, we need to answer two important questions.

Number one: if you or I had been in the garden and had faced the serpent's temptation, is it possible that we would have resisted and saved the world from evil and death?

Number two: if you were to ask people what is wrong with the world today, how many do you think would answer that we are sinners in need of a new heart? And how

many would say the main problems lie outside of self -- in places like criminal organizations, greedy bankers and politicians or would just say, "I don't know"?

If we can get the answers to both of these questions right, then we understand the need for the cross, although we may not fully understand the love that put Jesus there.

Question One: who among us would stand against the temptations of the evil one if it had been us in the garden? Answer? None of us. Why not? Because we all have a measure of pride that tells us that we know better than others. That pride will, sooner or later, tell us that we know better than God, that He's hiding something from us for no good reason, that He's keeping some joy, some wisdom, some great pleasure from us and we will act in rebellion against Him . . . even if just to satisfy our pride. We can call it curiosity, we can call it our 'need to know', but it leads us to go where we aren't supposed to go. Maybe if we were left entirely alone in the garden, we might have a chance of doing the right thing, but with a skilled and cunning tempter in there, we would have no better chance than Adam and Eve did.

The reason that question is so important is because it helps us see that we are responsible for Jesus being on the cross. It doesn't fall back on Adam, even though sin entered the human race through him. It was our sins that put Him there, our need that He came to meet, our lives that He redeemed from death through His sacrifice.

The second question: what is wrong with the world today?

My favourite answer to this question, because it so clearly describes the situation in the West today, came from the lips of Russian dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn when he began his Templeton address in 1983 -- this was a speech he gave when being awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

*More than half a century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.*

*Since then I have spent well-nigh fifty years working on the history of our Revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous Revolution that swallowed up some sixty million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.*

In warning the West of the dangers it faces in courting a communist philosophy he said, "*Within the philosophical system of Marx and Lenin, and at the heart of their psychology, hatred of God is the principal driving force, more fundamental than all their political and economic pretensions. Militant atheism is not merely incidental or marginal to Communist policy, it is not a side effect, but the central pivot.*"

He looked into a history in which the Russian church was weakened by divisions

within and by the embracing of secularism in the intellectual classes in the outside world of the 19th century. He saw a direct progression from this secularism to a long line of martyrs among the church beginning in the 1920's.

What's wrong with the world today? I've told the story before of the London newspaper that raised this question nearly a century ago and received all kinds of letters to the editor trying to explain it. The final entry to be printed was also the most profound. It read:

*Dear Sirs: I am. Sincerely, G.K.Chesterton*

Unless and until we admit that we are the problem, that sin has made a separation between ourselves and God and between us as people, we move ever closer to the mayhem that we have spent the past 8 weeks studying. Just as the Romans hated Christians and despised their way of life that made their own look self-indulgent and obscene, so our modern world is increasingly looking down at Christians, unwilling to admit that they are the problem, unwilling to admit that there is such a thing as sin. Here is Solzhenitsyn's analysis of the West:

*Imperceptibly, through decades of gradual erosion, the meaning of life in the West has ceased to be seen as anything more lofty than the "pursuit of happiness" . . . The concepts of good and evil have been ridiculed for several centuries; banished from common use, they have been replaced by political or class considerations of short lived value. It has become embarrassing to state that evil makes its home in the individual human heart before it enters a political system. Judging by the continuing land-slide of concessions made before the eyes of our very own generation, the West is inescapably slipping toward the abyss.*

If it has become embarrassing to say that evil makes its home in the individual human heart, then any attempt to explain the cross of Christ must also be embarrassing. Remember Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:23,24:

*We preach Christ crucified; a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called ... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

Having looked at the two questions which demanded some answer before we moved on, we now return to the God of the broken heart, the One who made all things good and so quickly saw them go so horribly bad . . . especially those creatures He had made in His image; human beings.

He called a man named Abram, later Abraham, to be the father of a nation of people who would be known as 'God's Chosen People', the Hebrews through whom He would show mercy to the world. Under slavery in Egypt they grew in numbers and then God delivered them in a miraculous way and set them on course to return to the land of promise, the land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But they were an embarrassment to God, rebelling against Him, doubting His power and His care, attempting to subvert the leader God had appointed and desiring nothing more than a return to slavery -- exactly the position of most of the Western world today. While Israel was still in the wilderness, God told Moses that He was willing to destroy this

rebellious house and make a great nation out of Moses' descendents. Even when they were safely inside the Promised Land, the Israelites repeatedly embarrassed their God, shaming His Name and bringing reproach on themselves. God was torn in how to respond to them:

*When Israel was a child, I loved him as a son, and I called my son out of Egypt. But the more I called to him, the more he rebelled, offering sacrifices to the images of Baal and burning incense to idols. It was I who taught Israel how to walk, leading him along by the hand. But he doesn't know or even care that it was I who took care of him. I led Israel along with My ropes of kindness and love. I lifted the yoke from his neck, and I Myself stooped to feed him.*

*But since My people refuse to return to Me, they will go back to Egypt and will be forced to serve Assyria. War will swirl through their cities; their enemies will crash through their gates and destroy them, trapping them in their own evil plans. For My people are determined to desert Me. They call Me the Most High, but they don't truly honor Me. Oh, how can I give you up, Israel? How can I let you go? How can I destroy you like Admah and Zeboiim? My heart is torn with me, and My compassion overflows. No, I will not punish you as much as My burning anger tells Me to. I will not completely destroy Israel, for I am God and not a mere mortal.*

When we talk about God's mercy and God's faithfulness, we may think that this was all easy for Him -- He shouldn't have a hard time showing mercy because He's Yahweh, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness. But the reality is that our sin has broken His heart again and again. We have caused the grief that He experienced the day His Son was nailed to a Roman cross and forced to endure the agony and the humiliation of death by crucifixion. On that day, at the moment Jesus gave up His Spirit and entered death, an event occurred which shows us just how much pain His death caused the Father. There was a curtain in the temple in Jerusalem which separated mortals from their God. Only once a year was a human being allowed to go beyond that curtain to offer sacrifices to God. When Jesus died that curtain was torn from top to bottom, as if the robe of God was being torn in a demonstration of intense grief and suffering. This was the classic Middle Eastern expression of heart-breaking, inconsolable grief.

Today we sang these words together:

*How deep the Father's love for us  
How vast beyond all measure  
That He should give His only Son  
To make a wretch His treasure  
How great the pain of searing loss  
The Father turns His face away  
As wounds which mar the Chosen One  
Bring many sons to glory*

This first verse of "How Deep the Father's Love" expresses the themes we've looked

at today. The second half reveals the pain of the Father:

*How great the pain of searing loss  
The Father turns His face away*

The first half reveals the reason Jesus went to the cross:

*That He should give His only Son  
To make a wretch His treasure*

The world doesn't want to admit to being wretched. They don't mind us singing "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." But they don't want to apply those words to themselves. The knowledge of our sinfulness before God has been buried under pop psychology, relativistic morality, and the rejection of God Himself. Nobody wants to hear it anymore. All people want to know is that when they die they go to a 'better place' and while they live they can pursue happiness, whatever route that takes them. That is ungodly, Christ-rejecting humanism and there is no basis for it in the revealed truth of God's word. It is the humanist's wishful thinking and is the enemy of truth, of love, of sacrifice and of genuine worship.

What are the take-homes today?

1. The cross of Christ is an offense to the world around us. People who should know better don't want to be told of their sin or their need for forgiveness. But we who value Jesus' sacrifice so highly need to make sure we're not intimidated by this - our call is to make God's grace known.
2. We are God's treasures -- if we can embrace the truth of the cross, we have to admit that God sees each one of us as being incredibly valuable, precious to Him, literally worth dying for. Someone here needs to embrace that today.
3. The big issue in the world today, and for each of us in the struggles of daily living, is to learn to walk humbly with God. It's pride that keeps people away from the grace that would save them. It's the humility that admits our need for the cross that opens the doors of heaven to us.